



Amrita Pritam's 'Pinjar': A Poignant Depiction of Wrath of Partition on Weaker Sex

Dr. Darkhasha Azhar, Dilkesh Kumar

Assistant Professor in English, Govt. P. G. College, Bisalpur, Pilibhit, UP, India
Scholar, Krishna Institute Meerut, UP, India

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Abstract— In 1947, a ghastly incident occurred in the Indian Sub-continent known as Partition of India under which two new countries India and Pakistan came into existence. And for these countries the incident proved to be the most atrocious and catastrophic incident in human history due to the occurrence of incessant robbery, kidnapping, rape and murder. Since then, Partition of India has been the most gruesome and ugly past of Indian history which puts the nation to shame whenever remembered or discussed. The partition and the associated bloody riots compelled many creative minds to create literary pieces capturing the inhuman acts of murder and brutal slaughter on both sides. The trauma of partition and agony experienced by the people of Indian Sub-continent found its voice in the literature of Partition written by various writers of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh in different languages. While some creations depicted the massacres during the refugee migration, others concentrated on the aftermath of the partition in terms of difficulties faced by the refugees on both sides of the border. Even now, after more than 75 years of partition, works of fiction and films are made that relate to the events of partition. A few literatures describing the human cost of independence and partition are 'Train to Pakistan' by Khushwant Singh, 'Toba Tek Singh' by Saadat Hassan Manto, 'Tamas' by Bhisham Sahni, and 'Midnight's Children' by Salman Rushdi. The present paper deals with the sensitive story picked from a Punjabi novel 'Pinjar' written by Amrita Pritam. Amrita is a prominent writer from Punjab who has provided an avid expression of the lives and experiences of women during Partition in many of her poems and novels. Pinjar is an appalling and petrifying story of a Hindu Girl who is kidnapped by a Muslim young man who marries her. In the course of events the girl again gets a chance to meet her family and re-unite which she is compelled to refuse as her parents denied accepting her saying that she has been defiled by a non-Hindu. The novel, in its flow of narration, unfolds the harrowing journey of innocent females whose whole life is rendered shattered due to a single episode called 'partition'.

Keywords— Gruesome, riots, depiction, massacres, refugees, kidnapped, harrowing.

"When a man denies the power of women, he is denying his own subconscious."

---Amrita Pritam

Partition is a simple word with deeper impact on the lives of those who encounter it. In August 1947, when after a slavery of three hundred years, the British finally left, the Sub-continent was ripped into two independent states: India (Hindu majority) and Pakistan (Muslim majority).

Immediately after this, there began one of the greatest migrations in human history, as millions of Muslims in India trekked to West and East Pakistan and Hindus and Sikhs headed in the opposite direction. And with this began one of the most horrifying annihilations of people on both fronts. The Partition of Sub-continent is one of the most distressing and bloodiest massacres in the history as it changed the whole scenario of Sub-continent creativity of the two different nations. Both countries fumed in

flames on petty issues which provided the authors with ample themes such as gender discrimination, abandonment, communal riots, cultural deterioration, dual marginalization, identity crises, physical and emotional traumas, the feeling of disgust and what not on which they wrote vehemently. Atrocity against women was not a new practise in this event and history has been a witness to physical, sexual and psychological violence on women in epidemic proportions worldwide. Women's body has been a site of contest in India since the Vedic age. Indian Epics like Mahabharata and Ramayana are also the examples of old age maltreatment, torture, suppression, exploitation and humiliation of women. They have been the victims of different types of brutalities in all the ages. Violence against can be inflicted at individual, interpersonal or collective levels in social, political, religious or domestic domain. Amrita Pritam's 'Pinjar' is one of the testimonies of women who sacrificed themselves for their family and suffered the consequences of displacement, forced marriage, destitution and rape challenges during the gruesome partition, silently.

Amrita Pritam is a prolific and distinguished writer of Punjabi Literature. She was born on 31st August 1919 at Gujranwala in Punjab, which is now in Pakistan. Her father was a Sikh preacher and the editor of a literary journal. She started her career as an enlightened and creative woman writer. She was well aware and acquainted of the pitiable status of women in Indian society. In one of her interviews she expressed her opinion on feminism in the following words; 'feminism as slogan may be a need of time when the world is still living on the physical basis with the awareness that this world is man's world but we have to move higher than that' (Social science reviews). Amrita originally wrote the novel 'Pinjar' (The Skeleton) in Punjabi and it was Khushwant Singh who translated it into English. The novel capturing the gory massacre of partition highlights a woman's sufferings, exploitation and sacrifices because of her abduction during the division of India. It pictures the plight of women, in general, and focuses on their struggles and sufferings in the name of culture, religion and social norms. Before partition, women had no active participation in the economic and political spheres of the country and they peacefully thrived within the territory of their homes. The strong reason of their outdoor inactivity was that they were considered to be the repositories of honor and respect of the family and the community. If any dishonor befell on them, it was regarded as a humiliation to the male members of the clan and disgrace to the entire section. As a consequence, women became the soft and easy targets to satisfy one's communal sentiment. They were forced to encounter severe enormities like losing their families, becoming

victims of abduction, molestation, rape, naked parading, forcible marriage and conversion of religion, chopping off their breasts and tattooing genitals. A number of cases of shame-killings were also witnessed; where either the husbands killed their wives or the fathers killed their daughters in a bid to preserve the honor of their community. Thus, Women from all spheres of society, whether rich or poor, Hindu or Muslim; equally bore the sufferings caused by the communal violence.

Amrita Pritam heaves a feminist voice through her female character in the novel 'Pinjar'. She delineates the declining standard element of humanity through her novels. She has an in-depth and idiosyncratic approach towards feminism because she herself was a victim of partition. The novel throws light on the mental frame of the Indians during partition and proves that communal hatred had been soundly and deeply rooted in the minds of Hindus as well as Muslims. It was due to this reason that there was a killing spree on both the fronts and nobody was willing to give-up. The major sufferers, in the entire course, were the women and the children. Barbarism against women crossed all the levels of decency and occurred at the cost of humanism. There are numerous novelists who have worked on the theme of partition where in women have been identified not as human bodies but as Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs, ironically. Thus, to be more accurate and precise, Amrita Pritam's novel 'Pinjar' is a heart wrenching story of a Hindu girl. It is a saga of communal and religious conflict during partition which sabotaged the human self. It is a story of the abduction of a young girl 'Puro' by a man named Rashid, of rival religion, in order to avenge an old family enmity. And from here begins the horrifying journey of a kidnapped girl. The entire journey of transformation of Puro to Hamida analyses the novel as most depressing and distressing. It examines and traces the life of the protagonist Puro during the time of partition. The novelist critically explores the way in which the destiny of its protagonist eventually becomes the fate of thousands of women at the crucial time of partition. Her journey of life, after being uprooted from her soil and thrown into an alien land, is highlighted in the novel. 'Pinjar' is a shattering blow to the hegemonic patriarchal set up where a woman's body is considered as a site of contest and her fidelity is constantly questioned, thereby, subjugating her physical anguish and mental trauma.

In the major part of the first half of the novel we find that Puro's family is a happy family of two sisters and a brother. She is an obedient and ideal daughter, the darling of the parents. Her father, like all fathers, associates the idea of family honor with women of the family. The turning point in the story arrives when Puro is abducted by

Rashid, who is forced to do it, to avenge for a similar act committed by Puro's uncle, thus, portraying how conflicts between families, communities and nations are so often brutally and mindlessly played out on the bodies and identities of women. Rashid is a decent guy, he does not assault Puro. She, after a long struggle, manages to escape and goes home but is shockingly told by her father that there is no place for her in the family as she had been abducted which now puts her chastity and fidelity to question. Since she is abducted by a Muslim man, so it is taken for granted that, she is not chaste any more. But, as a matter of fact, Rashid does not rape her. Puro pleads before her parents for her acceptance claiming that Rashid has not done her any harm sexually but, to her dismay, she is rejected straightaway. The humiliation and the disgrace on the family honour and the threat that the entire family would be killed by the Sheikhs if they accepted her; is what made her father refuse to take her back. He says: *"Who will marry you? You have lost your faith and birth right. If we dare to help you, we will be cut down and finished without a trace of blood left behind to tell our faith"* (Amrita Pritam, Pinjar, P. 22). Her father refused to accept her reiterating that it would prove difficult for him to face up to the queries of the society in which he thrived. Rejection from her own family is another trauma that hits her hard. Refusal by her counterparts is a much larger blow than her abduction which consequently transformed her into a skeleton. She has been doubly violated, firstly by her abductor, Rashid, who bruised her physically and secondly by her own parents, who refused to feel her tragedy, *"She had believed she was returning to life. She had wanted to live again, to be with her father and mother, she had come with full of hope, now she had no hope, nor any fear"* (P. 23). Puro becomes the victim of the deeply ingrained gendered violence and has to pay a price of her own existence for the cultural role being assigned to her by the society. She is considered the symbol of honor and a medium of taking revenge. She asks Rashid; *"If my uncle abducted your aunt, what fault was that of mine? You have reduced me to homeless vagrant"* (P. 18).

Devastated and dejected, Puro ultimately returns to Rashid, to lead a hellish life. Her identity undergoes a drastic change. Rashid forces marriage on her and transforms her to Hamida from Puro. She now has a new identity which she resists as she longs for her family and marriage to Ramchand. On the other hand, Rashid is repentant for the crime of Puro's abduction and seeks redemption. He tries to provide love and care to Puro but she is unrelenting as the wounds inflicted by Rashid are unforgivable. In the course of time, Puro aka Hamida comes in contact with three females who were also the victims of gendered violence. All the three characters are

treated merely as body, not humans. Taro is suffering with some unknown disease and is disowned by her husband who has brought another woman to live with him and forces her to become a prostitute. Her illness and her husband's attitude towards her are unbearable. She desires death to free her from the caged life. She says to Puro: *"For full two years, I had to sell my body for a cup of pottage and few rags. I am like a whore, a prostitute.....there is no justice in the world, nor any God. He (her husband) can do what he likes. There is no God to stop him. God's fetters were for me and only for my feet"* (PP.36-38). The misfortune befallen on Puro is a pre-partition incident and is a result of the ancestral family feud. Thus, she is not a victim of communal violence but gendered violence in the patriarchal set-up of the society where women are used as objects of desire and as baits and are exploited for their personal interests. Rashid takes advantage of the situation and in the guise of abducting Puro, to satisfy his family members; he actually fulfils his personal desire to possess Puro since he loved her secretly. Puro's self is left traumatized with the upcoming awful life and it is reflected in her dreams and intuitions. She realizes her ill-fate and ultimately accepts her life as pictured by the destiny. Her heart is full of hatred for everybody as she thinks: *"He had robbed her of her birthright; he had robbed her of her future. Her parents had probably given her up for lost and left the village"* (P. 20).

She suffers with the pangs of loneliness as her family abandons her to live a life with a stranger, with no scope of seeing them again. It is like a re-birth with a new identity. Rashid marries Puro. She bears a son to Rashid. In the beginning of the novel the novelist has mentioned about Puro's disgust over having Rashid's child. She is utterly traumatized with the thought of carrying his child in her womb. Her disgust is visible in her feeling, *"She felt as if her body was a pea-pod inside which she carried a slimy, white caterpillar. Her body was unclean. If only she could take the worm out of her womb and fling it away! Pick it out with her nails as if it were a thorn! Pluck it off as if it were a maggot or leach...!"* (P. 01). She is tormented with the idea that: *"He had been planted inside her by force, nourished inside her womb against her will- and was now sucking the milk from her breasts, whether she liked it or not"* (P. 35). It shows her dislike for the men-folk who treat a women's body as an object of use. She is constantly grieved at the thought of carrying his child. Through this episode Amrita has highlighted the fact that women are considered merely bodies and nothing more than that and the violation of their bodies has become the moral perversion of the community itself.

The next female Puro meets is Kammo, a motherless young girl, who is disowned by her father and stays at her

aunt's house. Kammo is ill-treated and exploited by her aunt. She sees Hamida as her mother figure but her aunt dissuades her from meeting her as she is a Muslim. Puro's dilemma is repeated when Lajo, Puro's sister-in-law and the third female in Puro's life, is abducted by Muslim men and kept in capture in her own house and Ramchand comes to Puro seeking her help to release Lajo. Puro convinces Rashid to help Lajo return to her home. She reflects immense strength in the hour of crisis to help Lajo escape the clutches of her abductors. Here she realizes that the ultimate victims in all clashes are women, "*It was a sin to be alive in this world full of evil*", thought Hamida, "*It was crime to be born a woman*" (P.65). Almost all the female characters in the novel are victims of one or the other type of violence. They are oppressed by double yoke of patriarchy and dislocation. Puro is not only disowned by her own father but her fiancé Ramchand too, who questions her chastity, purity and dignity by ignoring to recognize her after her abduction.

Through the characters; Puro, Lajo, Taro and Kammo, the novelist has tried to unveil the facets of violence and trauma against women. Here Amrita highlights the fact that women have to constantly prove their innocence and assert their right to dignity in the patriarchal society. Another form of violence against women portrayed in the novel is the parading of women naked through the village and town. One such incident is mentioned in the novel, where a young girl was flaunted naked. Thus, the socially constructed identities shape the minds of the people making them its slaves. In the novel the novelist has also coined the character of an insane woman who becomes the victim of the lusty men who target mentally weak females. She accidentally barges into the village Sakkar where Hamida lives. Being all alone, she roams around the village laughing and shrieking ghoulishly. For many days, she stays in the village and is fed by the villagers but finally one day the Panchayat decides to abandon her and they escort her to some distant place away from Sakkar, so that some other village could take care of her. To their dismay, she returns the next morning and her loud lunatic laughter could be heard in the fields. In the course of time she is sexually abused and becomes pregnant. Her condition creates disgust for the beast who had committed the heinous act of impregnating an insane woman. The village women burst out angrily: "*What sort of a man could have done this to her?... They clenched their fist in anger... 'He must be a savage beast to put a mad woman in this condition'*" (P.53).

The violence inflicted on the woman with an unstable mind is a glimpse of the wrath rained on weaker sex of the society during partition. A child is forcibly planted in the mad woman's womb which agonizes

Hamida. The mentally unstable woman was unaware of the savagery inflicted on her body and the child growing in her womb. There were many such women who were mutilated and impregnated during the scary times of partition. The agony of the child forcibly planted in their wombs is the reverberation of Puro's hatred towards Rashid and her fetus. The novelist has voiced the trauma of rape through the symbol of mother's womb which has become the victim of violence. The communal savagery being inflicted upon people is precisely penned down by Amrita Pritam in these words: "*The streets ran with blood and were to be cluttered with Human corpses, with no one to bury or cremate them, the stink from putrefying flesh hung in the air spreading pestilences*" (P.84). Reena Mitra dwelling on the novel, presents an exact picture of *Pinjar* in her book entitled '*Critical Responses to Literature*'. She writes, "*Pinjar depicts a world of social reality which draws its meaning from an interpretation of experienced reality, a reality which is engendered not by a system or a doctrine that prevails but by a sense or sensitivity which helps organize that raw data of experiences into and takes stock of that which asserts itself in the experiential past, however much we try to banish it from our consciousness*" (P.100). Amrita Pritam, through her violated women characters in the novel, has brought forth the fact that women have been the prime victims in every communal strife, riots and wars. In the words of Dr. Archana Sinha, "*It has been quite disturbing experience all over the world that in any conflict, a war, civil strife, communal riots or disturbance; women and children became the prime victims of violence. Children are orphaned and women are not only widowed but also become victim of rape and abduction*" (P. 43).

Whether it is Puro or Hamida, Lajo, Taro, Kammo, the naked woman or the mad woman, a female easily becomes the 'other', unhindered, not only during the crisis of partition but even today. That 'other' whose life doesn't matter, whose voice is snubbed, whose identity is subjugated and who remains at the periphery of power struggle and power equation and continues to be marginalized and displaced at the cost of self annihilation. '*Pinjar*' thus, gives a voice to this 'other' and effectively shows concern to their displacement, marginalization, dual identity and powerlessness. Puro represents those thousands of women who were victims of violence. D. R. More has vehemently praised the novel for its "*poetic presentation of the theme of the exploitation of the weaker sex on the background of the partition tragedy*" (P.235). In the novel '*Train to Pakistan*' Khushwant Singh has unveiled the hollowness of social norms and absurd customs. When Sundari, a newly married bride, was going to Gujranwala with her groom on the fourth day of her

marriage on the way to Pakistan their bus was attacked. Her husband was stripped naked and she was sexually molested by the ferocious mob. All these and many more heinous incidents are an example of naked brutality on women in the name of partition. Ultimately Women are the sufferers as they are physically weak and an easily assessable target through whom the violator finds the infliction of pain unchallenging yet gory.

The partition of India, which was the result of some fundamentalist religious people, was mainly done to create two new countries in order to satiate the basic desires of few men. It was the consequences of some manipulative minds which not only divided two nations but also ripped apart human sentiments. Had it not happened; there would have been no partition and no gruesome events of robbery, kidnapping, murder and rape that took place abundantly and incessantly. The episode of partition is an ugly blot on the face of our nation that cannot be wiped out easily, it will require ages of sincere toil and dedicated effort to save humanity from the clutches of extinction. Pakistani historian Ayesha Jalal has termed the moment as a moment which has neither beginning nor end. *Pinjar* (The Skeleton) is a saga of helplessness of women and the struggle for survival of the individual amidst the socio-political and cultural forces. The novel highlights the ugly side of the hidden social evils and also the bitterness of the upheavals due to communal disparities. It displays a situation that cries out and pleads for dramatic and swift change. It can be concluded that the issues discussed in the novel bring forth and highlight the brutality against women during partition. The level of suffering might differ, but not a single woman was left unaffected by its ruthlessness. The scar narrates a long dark tale of painful life in an alien country at the hands of alien people. Due to the fear of losing one's sexual honor and to shield one from being abducted and raped; many women voluntarily jumped into the wells and killed themselves. They suffered for no fault of theirs. They were dislocated, displaced and disintegrated. They lost their identity and felt like aliens in the new land. But their inherent will and steely determination helped them restore normalcy. Puro's too, recoils to life because of her resilience.

Through these female characters, the novelist makes visible the trauma, anguish, pain and ambivalence that marks the experience of partition. It is the story of continuous wounds of patriarchy and partition and how it turns people into skeleton. The partition of India proved a storm in the lives of the women. It gave such traumas to them that they remained like living corpses all their lives and their sorrowful sighs got lost somewhere in that whirlwind of partition. Amrita Pritam states, "There are many stories which are not on paper, they are written in

the bodies and minds of women" (Punjabnetwork.com). To quote Mausami "The partition of 1947, India and Pakistan was not merely a division of land...it was a division of hearts, families, friends, souls, love and most of all "humanity". People died either "remembering their loved ones" or "finding their love ones". People died."(studocu.com)

"When the body perishes all perishes, but the threads of memory are woven of enduring atoms. I will pick these particles, weave the threads and I will meet you yet again".

-----Amrita Pritam

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